

METHODS FOR FABRICATING CELLULAR CUSHIONS

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of United States Patent Application serial no. _____, filed May 29, 2003, by Kevin G. Fraser et al. and entitled "Methods and Apparatus for Fabricating Cellular Cushions" all of which is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates generally to cellular cushions, and more particularly, to methods for fabricating cellular cushions.

[0003] Individuals confined to wheelchairs, for example, may develop tissue breakdown and/or pressure sores, which may be extremely dangerous and difficult to cure. More specifically, because such individuals may primarily remain in a seated position for extended periods of time, their weight may be concentrated in the bonier portions of the individual's buttocks. Over time, blood flow to such areas may decrease, causing tissue to break down in these areas.

[0004] To facilitate reducing the weight concentration of such individuals, at least some known wheelchairs use cellular cushions to facilitate distributing the individual's weight over a larger area and across the individual's buttocks, and to facilitate decreasing the user's weight concentration in smaller areas. Known cellular cushions include a plurality of hollow fluid-filled cells which project upwardly from a common base. The plurality of air-filled cells are coupled in flow communication through the base, such that the air pressure within the cells is at the same pressure throughout the plurality of cells, and as such, each cell exerts the same pressure against an individual's buttocks.

[0005] To facilitate providing uniform load supporting characteristics, known cushions are fabricated with a plurality of substantially identical cells. More specifically, to facilitate preventing pressure sores to a seated user, known cushion cells are fabricated using a dipping process in which the cells may be formed over a mandrel. During a dipping process the cells are formed by repeatedly dipping a form into a vat of liquefied material, such as natural or synthetic

latex. The dipping process may be repeated until the material on the form reaches a desired thickness, wherein the accumulated material is cured and stripped from the mold. However, depending on the shape and number of the cells being formed, such cushions may be difficult and/or expensive to manufacture. Specifically, the external profile of at least some known cells may prevent the cushion material from being distributed uniformly across the cushion. Moreover, depending on the shape of the cells, air bubbles or pockets may develop within the cell sidewalls during the dipping process. Over time, because the air bubbles weaken the structural integrity of the wall in which they are formed, such bubbles may eventually lead to cushion failure.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] In one aspect, a method for fabricating a cellular cushion is provided. The method comprises injecting material into a mold in an injection molding process to form a cushion first layer that includes a plurality of hollow cells that extend outward from the base and are coupled together in flow communication, coupling a second layer to the first layer, and coupling an injection stem in flow communication to the plurality of hollow cells to enable an operating pressure within the cells to be changed.

[0007] In another aspect, a method for fabricating a flexible cushion is provided. The method comprises forming a plurality of hollow cells with an injection molding process, coupling the plurality of cells to a flexible base, and coupling a sealing layer to the flexible base such that the plurality of hollow cells are coupled together in flow communication with each other.

[0008] In a further aspect, a method for fabricating an inflatable cushion is provided. The method comprises forming a flexible base using an injection molding process such that a plurality of hollow cells each extend outwardly from the base and are coupled together in flow communication, and coupling a second layer to the base such that a plurality of fluid control devices defined by at least one of the base and the sealing layer are each positioned between adjacent hollow cells to selectively control flow communication independently to each of the plurality of hollow cells.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Figure 1 is a perspective view of an exemplary cellular cushion;

[0010] Figure 2 is a plan cross-sectional view of a portion of the cellular cushion shown in Figure 1;

[0011] Figure 3 is a cross-sectional view of a portion of the cellular cushion shown in Figure 2 and taken along line 3-3;

[0012] Figure 4 is an exploded view of the cellular cushion shown in Figure 1, and viewed from the bottom side of the cellular cushion;

[0013] Figure 5 is a plan view of a portion of an alternative cellular cushion;

[0014] Figure 6 is a cross-sectional view of a portion of the cellular cushion shown in Figure 5;

[0015] Figure 7 is a partial plan view of an alternative cellular cushion including a lock pocket arrangement that may be used with the cellular cushion shown in Figure 1;

[0016] Figure 8 is a simplified schematic illustration of an exemplary injection molding apparatus that may be used to fabricate at least a portion of the cellular cushions shown in Figures 1-7;

[0017] Figure 9 is a cross-sectional view of a portion of the cellular cushion shown in Figure 6 and including an integrally formed valve stem; and

[0018] Figure 10 is an enlarged cross-sectional view of the valve stem shown in Figure 9 and taken along line 10-10.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0019] Figure 1 is a perspective view of an exemplary cellular cushion 10. Figure 2 is a plan cross-sectional view of a portion of cellular cushion 10. Figure 3 is a cross-sectional view of a portion of cellular cushion 10. Figure 4 is an exploded view of cellular cushion 10. Cushion 10 is flexible and as described herein,

is configured for use on an underlying support surface, such as, but not limited to a chair seat, a mattress, or a wheelchair. Cushion 10 includes a base 12 and a plurality of hollow cells 14. In the exemplary embodiment, base 12 is substantially rectangular and includes a forward side 16 and a rear side 18 connected together by a pair of opposing sides 20 and 22. In an alternative embodiment, base 12 is non-rectangular. In the exemplary embodiment, cells 14 are arranged in a plurality of rows 24 which extend substantially across base 12 between sides 20 and 22, and between forward and rear sides 16 and 18, respectively. In an alternative embodiment, cells 14 are arranged in other geometric configurations and not arranged in rows 24.

[0020] In the exemplary embodiment, base 12 is flexible and is formed from a plurality of layers 30 that are coupled together. In an alternative embodiment, base 12 includes only one layer 30 and an air transfer gasket which enables at least some cells 14 to be coupled together in flow communication. In one embodiment, base 12 and cells 14 are formed from a flexible material such as, but not limited to an elastomer material such as neoprene. Alternatively, base 12 and cells 14 are formed from a non-neoprene material that enables cellular cushion 10 to function as described herein. In the exemplary embodiment, a middle layer 40 and an outer layer 42 are each coupled to a conformal layer 44 to form base 12, as described in more detail below. In one embodiment, at least one layer 40, 42, and/or 44 is fabricated from a material that prevents that specific layer from bonding against the other layers. In an alternative embodiment, base 12 includes more than three layers 30. In a further alternative embodiment, base 12 only includes conformal layer 44 and middle layer 40.

[0021] In the exemplary embodiment, conformal layer 44 is formed unitarily with cells 14 such that cells 14 are coupled together in an arrangement 48 of air cells 14 wherein all of the cells 14 are in fluid flow communication with each other, as described in more detail below. In an alternative embodiment, cells 14 across layer 44 are not all coupled together in fluid flow communication, but rather, layer 44 is defined into regions or quadrants of cells 14 that are coupled together in fluid flow communication with each other, as described in more detail below. More specifically, in the exemplary embodiment, cells 14 are positioned substantially symmetrically across conformal layer 44 within cell arrangement 48, such that adjacent cells 14 are separated by a substantially equal distance D_1 . In an alternative embodiment, cells 14 are separated by variable distances. In an alternative embodiment, conformal layer 44 is formed from a material that prevents that specific layer from bonding against the other layers.

embodiment, conformal layer cells 14 are coupled together in a different arrangement and/or orientation with respect to each other.

[0022] In the exemplary embodiment, conformal layer 44 is formed integrally with cells 14 using an injection molding process. In an alternative embodiment, injection molded cells 14 are coupled to layer 44 using a known coupling method, such as, but not limited to radio frequency (RF) welding. In the exemplary embodiment, the injection molded cells 14 are all identical and each has an identical height H and because each is substantially circular, each has an identical diameter D₂. Alternatively, a plurality of different-sized cells extend from base 12. More specifically, as described in more detail below, in the exemplary embodiment, the injection molding process enables conformal layer 44 to be formed with a thickness T_{CL} that is substantially constant through cells 14 and across layer 44.

[0023] In the exemplary embodiment, a plurality of channels 50, known as release-agent channels, extend between adjacent cells 14. More specifically, channels 50 are arranged in X-shaped patterns that extend between four adjacent cells 14. Channels 50 are coupled in sealing contact with conformal layer 44. In one embodiment, channels 50 are coupled to layer 44 using a silk screening process. In another embodiment, channels 50 are formed integrally with conformal layer 44. In a further embodiment, channels 50 are coupled to layer 44 using an X-Y printing machine process. In yet another embodiment, channels 50 are coupled to layer 44 using an adhesive process. In a further embodiment, channels 50 are formed using a liquid gasket process. In another embodiment, channels 50 are formed using a spray process. In a further embodiment, channels 50 are coupled to layer 44 using any process that enables channels 50 to couple to layer 44 such that adjacent cells 14 are coupled together in flow communication.

[0024] In the exemplary embodiment, a release agent is contained within each channel 50. The release agent facilitates ensuring that channels 50 remain substantially unobstructed during the assembly of cushion 14, such that adjacent cells 14 remain in fluid flow communication. More specifically, and as described in more detail below, during assembly of cushion 14, the release agent ensures that adjacent cushion layers 30 remain separated to define channels 50. In the exemplary embodiment, the release agent is formed of a low viscous solution of talc powder and a carrier, such as, but not limited to alcohol, that is applied using a high volume low pressure (HVLP) sprayer. In another embodiment, the release agent is any solution

that performs as described herein, and more specifically, prevents the bonding together of the layers 40, 42, and 44, such as, but not limited to, petroleum-based mixtures.

[0025] Middle layer 40 is sized approximately the same size as conformal layer 44 as defined by an outer perimeter of each layer 40 and 44. In the exemplary embodiment, layer 40 defines a plurality of fluid control devices 70 that are coupled together across cushion 10 in fluid flow communication. In the exemplary embodiment, fluid control devices 70 are known as lock pockets. In an alternative embodiment, lock pockets 70 extending across layer 40 are not all coupled together in fluid flow communication, but rather, layer 40 is defined into regions or quadrants of lock pockets 70 that are coupled together in fluid flow communication with each other to perform as described herein. More specifically, lock pockets 70 are coupled together by a plurality of lock pocket channels 72. In the exemplary embodiment, lock pockets 70 are substantially circular and each has a diameter D_3 that is less than a length L_1 of conformal layer channel 50. In an alternative embodiment, lock pockets 70 are non-circular.

[0026] In another alternative embodiment, cushion 10 does not include lock pockets 70, but rather includes a plurality of other fluid control devices which operate to perform the same flow communication function as lock pockets 70 as described herein. For example, such control devices may include, but are not limited to including, mechanical devices, electro-mechanical devices, pneumatic devices, hydraulic devices, electrical devices, or magnetic devices. In another example, the fluid control devices project outwardly from layer 40 in an arrangement that enables each fluid control device to be substantially centered with respect to the center intersection 74 of X-shaped channels 50. Within this exemplary embodiment, if a cell 14 or group of cells 14 develops a leak, when that particular cell deflates, the weight of a seated user 76 will cause the center intersection 74 to contact the fluid control device, such that fluid flow between adjacent cells 14 through that particular channel intersection 74 is prevented, as is described in more detail below.

[0027] Lock pockets 70 are arranged in a pattern that extends across layer 40 such that each respective lock pocket 70 is positioned substantially concentrically with respect to the center intersection 74 of X-shaped channels 50, when layer 40 is coupled to conformal layer 44. Accordingly, in this arrangement, when layers 44 and 40 are coupled together, lock pocket channels 72 are substantially

centered, and extend, between adjacent cells 14. In an alternative embodiment, lock pockets 70 are not concentrically oriented with respect to channel intersection 74, but rather are still positioned relative to channels 50 to enable lock pockets 70 and cushion 10 to perform as described herein.

[0028] In the exemplary embodiment, lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72 are formed within layer 40 by coupling polymers to layer 40. In one embodiment, the polymers are coupled via a radio frequency welding process, wherein the polymers are positioned across layer 40 in the pattern described above, such that layer 40 may then be coupled to conformal layer 44. In one embodiment, layer 40 is coupled to layer 44 with a lamination process. Specifically, in the exemplary embodiment, prior to layer 40 being coupled to layer 44, an adhesive material is applied to layer 40 such that the adhesive material extends substantially across layer 40 between lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72.

[0029] When layer 40 is coupled to conformal layer 44, layer 40 mates in sealing contact with areas of conformal layer 44 that extend between adjacent cells 14, and around an outer perimeter of each cell 14. More specifically, when layer 40 is coupled to layer 44, lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72 are properly oriented relative to cells 14, and are defined against conformal layer 44 and between a lower surface 80 of layer 40 and an upper surface 82 of layer 42. In another embodiment, lock pocket channels 72 are defined between layers 44 and 40. The release agent prevents layer 40 from sealing against conformal layer 44 in areas defined by channels 50, such that, as described in more detail below, fluid flow between layers 40 and 44 is only possible through channels 50.

[0030] After layers 40 and 44 are coupled together, outer layer 42 is coupled to layer 40 such that layer 40 extends between conformal layer 44 and outer layer 42.

[0031] Base 12 also includes a pair of inflation/deflation valves 90 and 92 that extend from base 12. Valve 90 is known as a fluid locking pocket valve and is only coupled in flow communication to locking pockets 70 via channels 72. Specifically, valve 90 may be selectively opened and closed to enable fluid to be injected into, or discharged from, lock pockets 70. In an alternative embodiment, base 12 includes a plurality of inflation/deflation valves 90 and/or 92. More specifically, because layer 40 is coupled to conformal layer 44 except at pockets 70, channels 72, and channels 50, this enables air to pass between layers 44 and 40 through channels

72 and into lock pockets 70. Accordingly, because lock pockets 70 are coupled together in flow communication, valve 90 enables the fluid pressure within pockets 70 to be adjusted substantially simultaneously, such that the fluid pressure within all lock pockets 70 is approximately equal. In the exemplary embodiment, the working fluid supplied to lock pockets 70 is air. In an alternative embodiment, the working fluid is any fluid that enables cushion 10 to function as described herein, including, but not limited to, other gases, fluids, or liquids.

[0032] Valve 92 is known as a cushion valve and is only coupled in flow communication to cells 14 through channels 50. Specifically, valve 92 may be selectively opened and closed to enable fluid to be injected into, or discharged from, cells 14. More specifically, because layer 40 is coupled to conformal layer 44 except at pockets 70, channels 72, and channels 50, airflow is possible between layers 44 and 40 through channels 50 and into cells 14. Accordingly, in the exemplary embodiment, because cells 14 are coupled together in flow communication, when cells 14 are initially inflated, and prior to a user 76 being seated on cushion 10, cells 14 are each pressurized to approximately the same fluid pressure. In the exemplary embodiment, the working fluid supplied to cells 14 is air. In an alternative embodiment, the working fluid is any fluid that enables cushion 10 to function as described herein, including, but not limited to, other gases, fluids, or liquids.

[0033] During use, in the exemplary embodiment, initially cushion 10 is inflated by introducing air through valve 92 into channels 50 and cells 14. Moreover, in the exemplary embodiment, cells 14 are pressurized substantially equally across cushion 10 and each cell 14 is inflated to have a generally circular cross-sectional profile. In an alternative embodiment, cells 14 have a non-circular cross-sectional profile. In a further alternative embodiment, layer 44 is defined into regions or quadrants of cells 14 that are coupled together in fluid flow communication with each other, and cells 14 within each region or quadrant are inflated to substantially the same fluid pressure. Specifically, the fluid pressure of each cell 14 is variably selectable by the seated user 76 based on comfort and/or seated immersion requirements, and is adjustable by either adding additional air, or opening valve 92 to decrease the pressure in cells 14. More specifically, as cells 14 are inflated, adjacent cells 14 contact each other, such that cells 14 form a generally continuous, and highly displaceable, supporting surface that is highly conformable to the seated user 76 and provide substantially uniform load supporting characteristics across cushion 10.

[0034] When all of cells 14 are inflated together, which is normally the case, the sides of adjacent cells 14 contact each other and form a generally continuous, but highly displaceable, supporting surface. Moreover, in the exemplary embodiment, because cushion 10 is cellular, the weight of the seated user 76 is distributed broadly with decreasing peak pressures across the entire area of the user's buttocks and therefore, cushion 10 dissipates pressures resulting from the weight supported at the ischia, or bony prominences of the buttocks. Because cells 14 are fabricated using an injection molding process, cell wall thickness' T_{CL} across conformal layer 44 are substantially equal. Accordingly, because injection molded cells 14 are defined by substantially uniform wall thickness' T_{CL} , a durability of cushion 10 is facilitated to be increased in comparison to known cushions fabricated with a dipping process.

[0035] After the fluid pressure within cells 14 is substantially equalized, such that in the exemplary embodiment, each cell 14 contains approximately the same fluid pressure, air is introduced into lock pockets 70 through valve 90 and channels 72. More specifically, as air is introduced into lock pockets 70, the fluid pressure within pockets 70 is increased. Because each pocket 70 is positioned substantially concentrically with respect to the center intersection 74 of X-shaped channels 50, increasing the pressure within pockets 70 increases an amount of force induced to each center intersection 74. More specifically, as force is applied to channels 50, and specifically to intersection 74, flow communication is stopped between the immediate four cells 14 coupled together by the respective channels 50. In another embodiment, the fluid pressure within lock pockets 70 is not sufficient to stop flow communication between the immediate four cells 14 until a user 76 is seated on cushion 10.

[0036] Accordingly, fluid flow between cells 14 across cushion 10 is limited by lock pockets 70. As such, cushion 10 facilitates providing a more stable and more secure sitting surface to users 76 in comparison to that provided by other known cellular cushions. In particular, cushion 10 provides a stable and secure sitting surface even to a user 76 that does not have the energy and/or strength to maintain their pelvis in a symmetrical posture, or to those users 76 that may have a fixed deformity, such as a pelvic obliquity, that requires the sitting surface to conform to the user 76 without bottoming out. In addition, cushion 10 facilitates reducing sitting fatigue induced to, and increasing postural control of, the seated user 76. Furthermore, in the exemplary embodiment, because cushion 10 is not segmented into

zones of cells that are not in flow communication, but rather because all cells 14 are coupled in fluid flow communication, if a cell 14 develops a leak, the seated user 76 will not bottom out because lock pockets 70 enable only fluid pressure to escape from the particular cell 14 that developed the leak, rather than from all cells 14.

[0037] In an alternative embodiment, cushion 10 is supplied to the user 76 as a totally enclosed cushion that is pre-pressurized and does not include valves 90 and 92. Although cushion 10 provides a sitting surface for a seat, in a further alternative embodiment, cushion 10 is used for other cushioning purposes.

[0038] Figure 5 is a plan view of a portion of an alternative cellular cushion 200. Figure 6 is a cross-sectional view of a portion of cellular cushion 200. Cushion 200 is substantially similar to cushion 10 (shown in Figures 1-4) and components in cushion 200 that are identical to components of cushion 10 are identified in Figures 5 and 6 using the same reference numerals used in Figures 1-4. Accordingly, cushion 200 includes a base 202 that is substantially similar to base 12 and cells 14. Base 202 is formed from a plurality of layers 204 that are coupled together. More specifically, outer layer 42 and an upper layer 210 are each coupled to injection molded conformal layer 44 to form base 202. In an alternative embodiment, base 12 includes more than three layers 204.

[0039] In the exemplary embodiment, upper layer 210 has a cross-sectional area defined by an outer perimeter that is smaller than the cross-sectional area defined by conformal layer 44. Upper layer 210 defines a plurality of lock pockets 70 therein that are coupled together in flow communication. In another embodiment, upper layer 210 has a cross-sectional area that is approximately the same size, or larger than, the cross-sectional area of conformal layer 44. More specifically, the cross-sectional area defined by the outer perimeter of upper layer 210 is variably selected based on the number of cells 14 contained extending from conformal layer 44, and the associated number of lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72 to be defined therein. Accordingly, in the exemplary embodiment, upper layer 210 extends around substantially all of cells 14, with the exception of cells 14 positioned in the corners of cushion 200. Specifically, the size, shape, and orientation of layer 210 are variably selected to ensure that lock pockets 70 perform as described herein. More specifically, in the exemplary embodiment, layer 210 is selected to ensure lock pockets 70 are each positioned substantially concentrically with respect to the center

intersection 74 of X-shaped channels 50, when layer 210 is coupled to conformal layer 44.

[0040] In the exemplary embodiment, lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72 are formed within layer 210 by polymers that are coupled to layer 210. In one embodiment, the polymers are coupled via a radio frequency welding process, wherein the polymers are positioned across layer 210 in the pattern described above, such that layer 210 may then be laminated to an upper surface 222 of conformal layer 44. Specifically, prior to layer 210 being coupled to layer 44, an adhesive material is applied to layer 210 such that the adhesive material extends substantially across layer 210 between lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72.

[0041] Upper layer 210 also includes a plurality of openings 224 extending therethrough. Each opening 224 is sized to receive at least a portion of each cell 14 therethrough when layer 210 is coupled to conformal layer 44. Accordingly, in the exemplary embodiment, because cells 14 are substantially identical, each opening 224 is sized identically with a diameter D_4 that is slightly larger than cell diameter D_2 . More specifically, when layer 210 is coupled to conformal layer 44, layer 210 couples in sealing contact with areas of conformal layer 44 extending between adjacent cells 14, and around an outer perimeter of each cell 14. Accordingly, when layer 210 is coupled to layer 44, lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72 are properly oriented relative to cells 14, and are thus between conformal layer upper surface 222 and a lower surface 228 of layer 210.

[0042] After layers 210 and 44 are coupled together, outer layer 42 is coupled against conformal layer lower surface 82. Accordingly, in the exemplary embodiment, conformal layer channels 50 are defined between conformal layer 44 and outer layer 42. The release agent prevents outer layer 42 from sealing against conformal layer 44 in areas defined by channels 50. In another embodiment, cushion 200 includes lock pockets 70 defined above conformal layer 44 and below conformal layer 44.

[0043] Base 202 also includes inflation/deflation valves 90 and 92. In the exemplary embodiment, valve 90 is coupled to a bulb pump 232 that facilitates air flow into lock pockets 70. In another exemplary embodiment, both valves 90 and 92 are coupled in flow communication within base 202 to bulb pump 232 through a third valve that is selectively positionable to enable air flow to enter either valve 90 or

valve 92 when bulb pump 232 is activated. It should be noted that other valving arrangements are possible.

[0044] During use, initially cushion 200 is inflated by introducing air through valve 92 into channels 50 and cells 14, and then through valve 90 into lock pockets 70 and channels 72. In the exemplary embodiment, cells 14 are pressurized substantially equally across cushion 200 and each cell 14 is inflated to have a generally circular cross-sectional profile. In an alternative embodiment, cells 14 have a non-circular cross-sectional profile. Specifically, the fluid pressure of each cell 14 is variably selectable by the seated user 76 based on comfort requirements, and is adjustable by either adding additional air, or opening valve 92 to decrease the pressure in cells 14. More specifically, as cells 14 are inflated, adjacent cells 14 contact each other, such that cells 14 form a generally continuous, and highly displaceable, supporting surface that is highly conformable to the seated user 76.

[0045] When all of the cells 14 are inflated, the sides of adjacent cells 14 contact each other and form a generally continuous, but highly displaceable, supporting surface. Moreover, because cushion 200 is cellular, the weight of the seated user 76 is distributed broadly with decreasing peak pressures across the entire area of the user's buttocks and therefore, cushion 200 dissipates pressures resulting from the weight supported at the ischia, or bony prominences of the buttocks.

[0046] Furthermore, after cells 14 are inflated to a desired operating pressure, air is introduced into lock pockets 70 through valve 90 and channels 72 such that the fluid pressure within pockets 70 is increased. Because each pocket 70 is positioned substantially concentrically with respect to the center intersection 74 of X-shaped channels 50, increasing the pressure within pockets 70 increases an amount of force induced to each center intersection 74. In one embodiment, the increased fluid pressure within lock pockets 70 stops flow communication between each adjacent cell 14. In another embodiment, as user 76 sits on cushion 200, the weight of the user induced to lock pockets 70 increases fluid pressure acting on intersection 74 and causes flow communication to stop between adjacent cells 14.

[0047] Accordingly, fluid flow between cells 14 across cushion 200 is limited by lock pockets 70. As such, cushion 200 facilitates providing a more stable and more secure sitting surface to all users in comparison to that provided by other known cellular cushions. In particular, cushion 200 provides a stable and secure sitting surface even to a user 76 that does not have the energy and/or strength to

maintain their pelvis in a symmetrical posture, or to those users 76 that may have a fixed deformity, such as a pelvic obliquity, that requires the sitting surface to conform to the user 76 without bottoming out. In addition, cushion 200 facilitates reducing sitting fatigue induced to the seated user 76 while also providing enhanced postural control to the seated user 76. Furthermore, because cushion 200 is not segmented, but rather because all cells 14 are coupled in fluid flow communication, if a cell 14 develops a leak, the seated user 76 will not bottom out on cushion 200 because lock pockets 70 enable only fluid pressure to escape from the particular cell 14 that developed the leak, rather than from all cells 14.

[0048] Figure 7 is a partial plan view of an alternative cellular cushion 300 including a lock pocket arrangement 302 that may be used with cellular cushion 10 (shown in Figure 1). More specifically, cushion 300 is substantially similar to cushion 10 (shown in Figures 1-4) and components in cushion 300 that are identical to components of cushion 10 are identified in Figure 7 using the same reference numerals used in Figures 1-4. Accordingly, cushion 300 includes cells 14 and a base 304 that is substantially similar to base 12. Base 302 is formed from a plurality of layers 306 that are coupled together. More specifically, base 302 is formed with conformal layer 44, outer layer 42 (shown in Figures 1, 3, 4, and 6), and a secondary layer 308 that includes a plurality of lock pockets 70.

[0049] Conformal layer 44, secondary layer 308, and outer layer 42 are coupled together to form base 12. More specifically, in the exemplary embodiment, secondary layer 308 is substantially similar to middle layer 44 (shown in Figures 1-4) and is coupled to conformal layer 44 such that secondary layer 308 extends between conformal layer 44 and outer layer 42. In another embodiment, secondary layer 308 is substantially similar to upper layer 210 (shown in Figures 5 and 6) and is coupled to conformal layer 44 such that conformal layer 44 extends between secondary layer 44 and outer layer 42.

[0050] Lock pockets 70 and lock pocket channels 72 are defined within secondary layer 308 and are arranged in a pre-determined or programmed pattern 320 that is variably selected to meet a user's requirements. Moreover, in the exemplary embodiment, the pattern 320 of lock pockets 70 defines secondary layer 308 into quadrants 321 of cells 14 that do not include lock pockets 70, and as such, are non-controllable by lock pockets 70. Specifically, in the exemplary embodiment, lock pockets 70 are oriented within pattern 320 in a substantially plus-sign (+) shape,

and rather than extending across substantially all of layer 308, pockets 70 are defined within a pair of rows 322 and 324 that are oriented substantially perpendicular to each other. Alternatively, in other patterns 320, lock pockets 70 are arranged in other configurations and orientations with respect to secondary layer 308. More specifically, in the exemplary embodiment, each row 322 and 324 is substantially centered with respect to cushion 300, such that rows 322 and 324 intersect at an approximate center 326 of cushion 300.

[0051] Because lock pockets 70 do not extend substantially across cushion 300, quadrants 321 are defined within layer 308 by lock pocket rows 322 and 324. Specifically, although cells 14 are coupled in flow communication across conformal layer 44, only those cells 14 immediately adjacent rows 322 and 324 are effected by, and selectively controllable by lock pockets 70. In another embodiment, only cells 14 defined within each quadrant 321 are in flow communication, and as such, each quadrant 321 includes an inflation/deflation valve 92, and cushion 300 may include a plurality of inflation/deflation valves 90. More specifically, only those cells 14 separated by lock pockets 70 are selectively controllable, as described herein with respect to controlling fluid flow communication between the cells 14. Accordingly, patterns 320 are variably selected, based on a plurality of factors, including, but not limited to the physical limitations and/or demands of the user 76, such that cushion 300 facilitates providing the user 76 with varying degrees of control and comfort, without sacrificing stability to the user 76. It should be expressly noted that programmable patterns, such as pattern 320, may be employed with any cellular cushion that functions as described herein, and as such, is not limited to being used only with cushion 300.

[0052] Figure 8 is a simplified schematic illustration of an exemplary injection molding apparatus 400 that may be used to fabricate at least a portion of the cellular cushions shown in Figures 1-7. In one embodiment, apparatus 400 is a Desma® injection molding machine modified to fabricate cellular cushions and is commercially available from KDE Sales & Service, Inc., Hebron, KY 41048. More specifically, injection molding apparatus 400 includes a feed assembly 402 and a mold 404. Feed assembly 402 supplies or injects liquefied material into mold 404, and in the exemplary embodiment, includes a ram 410, an injection apparatus 412, and a material feed supply 414. In alternative embodiments, injection molding apparatus 400 includes other components.

[0053] Feed supply 414 channels liquefied material for use in fabricating cellular cushions, such as cushion 10 (shown in Figure 1) and more specifically, for use in fabricating a conformal layer including an arrangement of hollow cells, such as cells 14 (shown in Figure 1). In one embodiment, the material used in fabricating conformal layer with the injection molding process includes, but is not limited to any elastomer material that enables cushion 10 to function as described herein, such as, but not limited to nitrile rubber, EPDM rubber, fluoroelastomers, silicone rubber, neoprene rubber and/or styrene-butadiene rubber. Feed supply 414 is coupled in flow communication to injection apparatus 412 and channels a continuous source of liquefied material to injection apparatus 412.

[0054] Injection apparatus 412 includes an inlet 420, a discharge nozzle 422, and a manifold or cold pot 424. In the exemplary embodiment, apparatus 412 includes an internally threaded screw drive 426 that forcibly channels material discharged from feed supply 414 under pressure through discharge nozzle 422 and into manifold 424. Manifold 424 includes a plurality of mold injectors 430 which direct the liquefied material from injection apparatus 412 into mold 404. More specifically, the material is forced under high pressure into mold 404 such that the material is distributed substantially uniformly throughout mold 404. In one embodiment, mold 404 is a multi-piece assembly. After the conformal layer cures, the solidified part is extracted from mold 404.

[0055] Injection molding facilitates cushion cells being fabricated with a substantially uniform cell wall thickness across the conformal layer. As such, when a user is seated on the cushion and adjacent cells contact each other, the substantially uniform cell wall thickness facilitates preventing premature wear to the sidewalls defining the cells. More specifically, the injection molding process facilitates increasing a durability of cushion in comparison to known cushions fabricated with a dipping process.

[0056] Figure 9 is a cross-sectional view of a portion of cellular cushion 200, and illustrates an integrally-formed valve stem 500. It should be noted that cellular cushion 200 is exemplary only, and that valve stem 500 could be formed integrally with any cellular cushion, using the injection molding process described herein. Figure 10 is an enlarged cross-sectional view of valve stem 500. In the exemplary embodiment, valve stem 500 extends from, and is coupled in flow communication to at least one cell 14. More specifically, valve stem 500 is formed

integrally with cushion 200 during the injection molding process, such that after cushion 200 is assembled, an inflation/deflation valve, such as valves 90 or 92 (shown in Figure 6) may be coupled to cells 14 through stem 500.

[0057] The above-described cellular cushions provide a user with a sitting surface that is selectively controllable to facilitate increasing stability and comfort to the user. More specifically, the cellular cushions each include a conformal layer that includes a plurality of cells extending therefrom, wherein each cell extending from the conformal layer is coupled in flow communication with every other cell extending from the conformal. Furthermore, because the conformal layer is formed with an injection molding process, the cells are each fabricated with a substantially uniform wall thickness that facilitates increasing the durability of the cushions in comparison to other known cellular cushions formed with a dipping process. In addition to selectively controlling fluid flow communication between at least some of the cells within the cushion, the lock pockets also facilitate preventing the seated user from bottoming out while seated on the cushion and/or while the user shifts their weight relative to the cushion. As a result, a durable cellular cushion is provided which facilitates increasing the sitting support and stability provided to a seated user in a cost-effective and reliable manner.

[0058] Exemplary embodiments of cellular cushions are described above in detail. Although the cellular cushions are herein described and illustrated in association with seated users, it should be understood that the present invention may be used to provide cushioning in a plurality of other uses. Moreover, it should also be noted that the components of each cellular cushion are not limited to the specific embodiments described herein, but rather, aspects of each cushion and fabrication method may be utilized independently and separately from other methods described herein. For example, each of the above-described cellular cushions can employ lock pocket patterns as described in Figure 7.

[0059] While the invention has been described in terms of various specific embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention can be practiced with modification within the spirit and scope of the claims.